



U.S. Immigration
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Enforcement

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News Release

Leader in massive marriage fraud ring pleads guilty to charges stemming from ICE investigation – “Operation Newlywed Game”

SANTA ANA, Calif. — One of the key conspirators in an elaborate Orange County-based marriage fraud scheme faces up to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty in federal court to charges of visa fraud and conspiracy.

Julie Tran, 50, pleaded guilty here Friday to charges stemming from “Operation Newlywed Game,” a landmark investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) targeting a marriage fraud scheme involving hundreds of Chinese and Vietnamese nationals. Tran, who has been linked to as many as 75 sham marriages and the filing of more than 100 bogus visa petitions, was arrested by ICE agents in November 2005. Following a consensual search of her Garden Grove residence, agents recovered U.S. passports, miscellaneous immigration and financial documents, and approximately \$3,500 in cash.

According to court documents, the marriage fraud scheme, which resulted in 44 indictments, involved a loose-knit network of “facilitators,” “recruiters,” and “petitioners” based in Orange County’s Little Saigon. At the heart of the conspiracy were the facilitators, including Tran, who charged up to \$60,000 to orchestrate sham marriages for foreign nationals with U.S. citizens for the purpose of submitting fraudulent immigrant visa petitions on behalf of the aliens. The facilitators often used recruiters, who typically received \$1,000 for each referral, to identify U.S. citizens willing to marry the aliens and submit the immigration visa petitions to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The U.S. citizen petitioners were paid thousands of dollars, plus travel expenses.

Since the foreign nationals often resided in Vietnam or China, the facilitators would then make arrangements for the U.S. citizen petitioners to go overseas to marry the aliens. After the sham marriage, the facilitators assisted the petitioners and aliens with filing bogus immigration petitions. The facilitators would also coach the petitioners and the aliens on what to say at subsequent adjustment of status interviews to persuade the USCIS officer that the couple had a legitimate marriage.

“Marriage fraud and other forms of identity and benefit fraud are threats to national security and public safety because they create a vulnerability through which illegal aliens, criminals, and terrorists can enter the United States and remain here illegally,” said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge of the ICE office of investigations in Los Angeles. “This case should send a clear message that ICE is working aggressively to ensure that this kind of criminal activity does not go unchecked or unpunished.”

As part of “Operation Newlywed Game,” investigators reviewed scores of immigration files, as well as employment and travel histories to determine each defendant’s role. According to investigators, the suspects went to elaborate lengths to make the sham marriages appear legitimate, posing for wedding pictures, fabricating love letters, and even creating fraudulent joint tax returns.

Tran is scheduled to be sentenced on October 30, 2006. Conspiracy to commit visa fraud carries a penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. Filing a fraudulent visa petition carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. Consequently, Tran faces a maximum penalty of up to 15 years in prison and a \$500,000 fine.

Since April 2006, seven other defendants charged in connection with “Operation Newlywed Game” have pleaded guilty. Julie Tran’s sister, Kathy Tran, who was identified by ICE as another primary facilitator in the scheme, is scheduled to go on trial October 17, 2006.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.